

Press release: International Workers' Day

Cooperatives' ability to provide sustainable employment should inspire the future of work

According to soon to be released CICOPA study, Cooperatives represent 9% of the world's employed population

The world of work is undergoing enormous transformations: the quality and organisation of work, the crisis of social and economic systems and the so-called 4th industrial revolution are all turning the world upside down. As enterprises which are democratically owned and managed by their workers, producers and, in some cases, also their users, cooperatives in industry and services would like to mark **International Workers' Day** by reiterating once again that they can be one of the tools that will make it possible to safeguard sustainable employment by applying an equal distribution of work and wealth. Cooperatives should be recognised, especially considering the level of work they generate in representing **9% of the world's employed population**, according to the soon to be released [CICOPA](#) study, 'Cooperatives and Employment: Second Global Report'.

The study states that cooperatives provide employment to at least **15.5 million people in Europe** and 272 million people throughout the world[i]. Most of them are individual producers (244 million) working as self-employed in the framework of producers' and freelancers' cooperatives, which are to be found increasingly in industry and services. These cooperatives are a way for self-employed workers to overcome isolation and precariousness by pooling their resources and enjoying shared benefits such as accounting or marketing services.

Cooperatives' potential in providing decent work to self-employed people

The study analyses a double trend taking place globally: first of all, there is a massive net transfer of the employed population from an employee status to a self-employed status worldwide, together with a **resurgence in the informal economy and informal employment**, notably amongst home-based workers, domestic and care workers, waste pickers and street vendors, as well as in the construction sector, coupled with a **rise in global migration** in some of those sectors and the **increase in IT platforms** (the phenomenon known as "uberization").

Cooperatives in industry and services are beginning to respond to such challenges with innovative forms, such as freelancers' cooperatives and platform cooperatives. **How cooperatives are responding to the challenges of the future of work** was analysed at a workshop on the future of work organized by [CECOP – CICOPA Europe](#) in Malta on 26 April. During the workshop, Sandrino Graceffa, CEO of the Belgian cooperative of freelancer artists, [SMART.Be](#), gave a concrete example of how cooperatives can be a tool for independent workers to mutualize better labour conditions and better social protection. *"Uber workers are proletarians who do what the platform asks them to do. They are not free to choose the client, the contract, etc. and at the same time the platform is managed to make them think they are autonomous workers so that they do not pay the totality of the cost of labour. In this way, subordinate workers are*

transformed into freelance workers. In SMART.Be, we do exactly the opposite, workers keep a high level of autonomy and they get the status of salaried workers”, said Sandrino Graceffa.

As was also highlighted at the Malta workshop, industrial and service cooperatives have experience in welcoming refugees and providing employment to some of them, as illustrated by the personal account given to the workshop by Sira Madigata, a Malian refugee who was found on a raft in the Mediterranean and is now a worker-member and a cultural intermediary at the San Filippo Neri social cooperative in Italy.

During the workshop, Simel Esim, Head of the [ILO COOP Unit](#), explained that encouragement must be given to youth cooperatives which join forces to share risks, responsibilities and know-how. “*Some cooperatives of this type are beginning to emerge, but they require the right support to continue and this is where the cooperative movement is needed*”, she said. She also underlined how important it is for cooperatives to promote the ILO labour standards, such as those included in the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and the concept of Decent Work, to which they have committed themselves through the [ILO Recommendation 193 on the Promotion of Cooperatives](#).

Mario Cardona from the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment highlighted the fundamental importance of education to promote cooperative employment and work and the CECOP President, Giuseppe Guerini, concluded by observing that, whereas previously citizens’ identity came prevalently from work, it now tends to come from consumption and underlined the need to promote the integration of both work and consumption into the identity of citizens, in the dual defence of both workers’ and consumers’ rights.

‘Cooperatives and Employment: Second Global Report’ is a soon to be released CICOPA publication carried out with the financial support of the [International Cooperative Alliance](#).

You can consult the first edition of the study “Cooperatives and Employment : a global report” [here](#)

[i] 272 million are individual producers, 17 million are employees and 11 million are worker-members.

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CECOP – CICOPA Europe (European Confederation of Worker Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises) groups national organisations in 15 countries which in turn affiliate over 50.000 cooperative and participative enterprises in industry and services, the vast majority being SMEs, and employing 1.4 million workers across Europe. Most of them are characterised by the fact that the employees in their majority are members-owners, while some of them are second-degree enterprises for SMEs. Furthermore, around 4.000 of those enterprises are specialised in the reintegration of disadvantaged and marginalised workers (disabled, long-term unemployed, ex prisoners, addicts, etc).